# Entrepreneurial English: Teaching Business English through Simulation

*By Mary C. Black*

This paper summarizes an innovative, task-based business English course for university students studying business. The basis of the course is fictitious "companies" invented by students and serving as the vehicle for examining and practicing different language functions related to business English. The entire, yearlong class is a simulation in which the students' imagination compensates for their lack of real-world business experience.

## Developing the Idea of a Simulation Class

ESP is, by nature, content-based in that the students' purposes and interests are to a large extent uniform. In a way it is easier to develop an ESP class than a content-based ESL/FL class, because although both use content as a vehicle for language teaching, it is difficult to find topics which interest all of the students in the typical ESL/FL class; in ESP, that topic-the students' field-is given. That is, they share a common interest or body of substantive knowledge; and by extension, they generally work in the same *field*.

But what happens when the students in an ESP class are students of the *field* , too? That is, while they share the same interests, they lack technical knowledge and experience. As teachers of ESP know, the most fertile source for ideas, discussions, and activities in the average ESP class comes from students' experiences in the subject field. So when the students have only theoretical knowledge, class activities are somewhat bereft of ideas and input.

This was the situation faced when the Instituto de Estudios Norteamericanos (IEN) was contracted by a local university to provide a low-intermediate level business students' English class. We wanted to develop a class that would correspond to what the students already knew about business and English, but we couldn't simply transfer the curriculum of our other business classes to this setting because of the students' lack of experience in the business world. We wanted to devise a class that was not only cohesive throughout its duration, but also that would be cumulative in language and content. We wanted to avoid a problem which is specific to the EFL setting-the lack of accessible, appropriate materials in English.

My colleague, Theresa Zanatta, designed this simulation class to suit the students' needs.

What exactly is a simulation class? We're all familiar with simulations, or rather simulations on a small scale in the form of roleplays. Roleplays are a particularly effective way to motivate students in that they not only supply the topic and context of a situation, they also give the participants an excuse to *escape* their shyness or inhibitions, and to overcome their low-level of experience, by providing an alternate, imaginary identity. A simulation class, then, is a roleplay

writ large. That is, for the entire course, students are not themselves, or not exactly; rather they take on a fictitious role-that of entrepreneur, president, or owner of their own company. Their companies serve as a vehicle to study various functions of business English and the language implementing these functions.

## Entrepreneurial English

So how exactly does Entrepreneurial English work? The students are told in the first week of class that they each are to create a company-any company they want. To get them started, we brainstorm names of companies; we usually start with famous ones like Adidas, Nissan, IBM, and students take it from there, adding as many new names as possible. We try to classify them into such groups as product/service, big/small, publicly/ privately owned, domestic/international, and so on, in an effort to make them aware of the infinite possibilities which exist. This helps to insure that when they decide on their own particular company, it will be one that truly interests and motivates them.

They are given one to two weeks to choose their companies, and most have ideas readily-the most popular being hotels, restaurants, and travel agencies. Some of the students get really creative, though, and some of the more unusual companies I've seen are: a fantasy game-playing company and a hot-air balloon ride travel agency. Some of the students, moreover, are ecologically aware, and have started companies such as Ecological Motors, and Rewaste Corp., a company which recycles industrial waste. We don't put any constraints on the type of company students choose; the most important thing is that they are interested in it.

The next step is choosing a name for the company, then a logo and slogan. This brings in ideas of target market and image, which help the students further define their companies. Frequently there is language interference at this stage resulting in strange sounding names of companies ("Cakes and Milky Products," later changed to "Cakes and Milk Products"), or awkward slogans ("Feeling Like at Home," later changed to "Your home away from home"). During this initial stage and throughout the entire course, students are given plenty of time for brainstorming, consulting and sharing ideas with each other, and frequently the endeavor becomes a contest to see who can come up with the most original idea.

After deciding on the kind of company, its name, logo and slogan, the preliminary part of the course is finished, and the real course can begin. Now we move from general concepts and learner training to the specific functions and language of business English.

This class is task-based and function-oriented; it's divided into different units, each of which examines a different function related to business English, at the end of which the students perform evaluated tasks. For more information on the methodology of task-based syllabi, see Long and Crookes (1992). By the time a given task is due-usually about two weeks after it has been introduced-students have been exposed to and have actively practiced the language and concepts necessary to perform the task. The particular value of a simulation course is that rather than being composed of separate, unrelated units, the tasks are all tied together and performed in

relation to each student's company. Students not only develop their own company, they also watch the development of their classmates' companies.

The class at this university is divided into ten-week trimesters. Within each trimester we have a module of five units, thus spending about two weeks on each unit. Classes meet three hours per week, and since it's a university class, homework is required. Divided thus, the figure on the right gives the yearlong class plan, unit-by-unit.

Following is a review of each unit, with a brief explanation of the purpose and tasks to give an idea of how the class develops throughout the year. For a more detailed description of each unit with regard to tasks, functions, vocabulary and grammar covered in each unit, see Appendix 1.

## *Module one*

Unit 0, in which the students create their companies, logo and slogan, serves not only as an introduction to the course concept but also as a brief period for learner training. Students are made familiar with a class in which they have to be active, creative participants every day-unlike their other classes where they're only passive recipients of knowledge.

The first unit-company profile-is an opportunity for the students to further define their companies. In this unit, they discuss general points of their company such as the founder, founding date, location, number of branches or subsidiaries, number of employees, and so on. At this stage students are still adjusting to the idea of the simulation-to the idea that they *have* a company, so the company profile gives them a general way to ease into a more precise description of their company.

After the company profile, we delve a little further into the second unit by discussing the organization of the company. The students must draw the company's *organigram* in detail and describe it in terms of both the hierarchy and the specific responsibilities of each person or position. This unit introduces the vocabulary of job titles as well as the language of job responsibilities and hierarchy. With more experienced students, this is also an opportunity to discuss more innovative ways of organizing a company, such as the horizontal or matrix *organigram* . However, in this class, the students can decide for themselves the best way to organize their company while we focus on the accuracy of their language.

Next we have a unit on advertising and marketing in which the students create an advertisement. This can be an ad for a specific product, product line, service or service line, but it can also be an ad which communicates the company philosophy or image; and we look at real ads for ideas and inspiration.

This unit involves the vocabulary of marketing and promotion, as well as language related to product specifications. In addition to the ad, we require the students to give a brief description of the targeted market and the form the ad will take-usually printed media. I should explain that this unit and the one with slogans and logos are unique in that they deal with visual or graphic elements. For those students so inclined, this is an opportunity to demonstrate their creative talents. However, for others who are *not* very artistically skilled, we emphasize that an elaborate

drawing is not required; a simple, computer-drawn or hand-lettered logo and ad suffice, as long as they are neat, appropriate, and professional.

After the ad, we go into describing a system or a process within the students' companies. We look at the obvious examples such as a production process, and we spend time discussing the wide variety of systems and processes which exist in any company, e.g. the processes of recruiting and training new employees, or ordering supplies. The students must make a flow chart of the system or process employed in their company, and then describe it in more detail orally and in writing.

In this unit we review such grammar as the passive voice and first conditional, and we begin to look at rhetorical devices that give cohesion to writing-in this case sequence words.

The final unit for this module is a formal oral presentation. All the previous units involved informal, small-group discussions and presentations as a way to share information, get to know other students and their companies, and make the students more comfortable speaking English with each other. This presentation, then, serves as a consolidation of all they've done in that the students must give a brief presentation about their company to potential investors. Thus, they not only have to choose what information to include in the talk, they also have to prepare appropriate visuals, such as their logo or their ad, and create a pretext for asking for investment, such as a renovation of their facilities, or the purchase of new machinery or equipment. We give tips for organizing a presentation as well as phrases typically used. Up to this point the language work has prepared the students linguistically for this task while the speaking practice has made them psychologically prepared.

The day of the presentations, the entire class is a roleplay, in that the students in the audience are the potential investors who want to ensure that they are investing money in a sound company, and therefore ask lots of questions. Rather than falling asleep from hours of listening to others talking, students have an opportunity to listen *and* speak during these presentations and they have a good chance to get updated on the progress of the other students' companies. In addition to the fun of challenging each other with questions, the students realize at this point just how much business English they have learned. Their companies begin to take on a life of their own.

## *Module two*

We usually spend the first class of the next module with an interlude of purely oral practice as a way of easing the students back into English and their roles as entrepreneurs. At the end of the previous module, students are told to bring business cards to the first day of class. We exploit this as an opportunity for "networking" and developing contacts between the students and their companies. After briefly reviewing the language of small talk and introductions, we tell the students that they're at a meeting of the Barcelona Entrepreneurs' Association (BEA), and that they should try to make contacts and exchange business cards with at least three other company presidents/owners for future joint projects. For example, an owner of a clothing store might exchange cards with the owner of a textile mill; or an owner of a large, multinational company might give his/her card to the owner of a chain of hotels oriented to business people. Later this

can lead to one-on-one meetings in which the details of the deals are worked out and then written-up into reports.

The first unit of the second module-telephoning-continues this oral theme. We deal with requests and typical phrases heard on the telephone, and we do lots of roleplays. The purpose of this unit is to expose the students to the language of telephoning and to give them oral practice. Later in this module we recycle these language skills when we study arrangements.

Next comes a report on a new product or service launched by the company in the recent past. For this, we refer back to the advertisements from the previous module. The students are required to report on that event including details about the product or service launched, the origin of the idea, feasibility analyses conducted or prototypes built, the marketing process, and the results to date. This is the first truly complex composition they have to write, incorporating all this information into a coherent whole: narrating past activities, discussing specifications and explaining a process. This is a bit daunting for low-intermediate students, so a model is given and we introduce rhetorical devices to achieve compositional coherence in the writing assignment.

The next unit is on describing business trends, and this involves describing a graph of past company activities-usually sales. We review the vocabulary of describing trends as well as more descriptive language to describe degree or rapidity of change. In addition, we discuss the language of cause and effect and attempt to identify the causes of these trends. The students must draw a graph representing the sales from the last year, and describe the fluctuations in sales orally and in writing.

The next unit is on arrangements. From earlier work, the students have become familiar with the basics of telephone talk, and in this unit they deepen their knowledge by reviewing the language of requests, invitations, accepting and rejecting. We do many roleplays to practice these functions.

This leads nicely into the next unit on meetings, in that first the students have to arrange the date, time, and place of the meeting with their colleagues. We go over verbal skills appropriate for meetings, such as stating opinions, agreeing, disagreeing, and interrupting. Then, a scenario for a simulation meeting is given as we tell the students that they are at another meeting of the BEA. It is planning a trade fair to give local companies (and the BEA itself) more exposure. Certain members of the BEA, (students in the class) volunteer to organize the fair, and to do this they need to plan in advance. After brainstorming, they form subcommittees dealing with finance, participant services, etc. Students choose the subcommittee to work on that reflects their interests; for example, an owner of a publicity agency can work on the advertising campaign, or a restaurant owner can work on the concessions committee.

Each subcommittee is then told to plan some alternative proposals for an upcoming meeting of the entire group where final decisions will be made collectively. As students get into their subcommittees, we ask for one to volunteer to chair the meeting and prepare an agenda; the others plan their proposals. When the meeting begins, the students usually participate in a spirited manner. The students began this class at a low-intermediate level, and by now they have

been studying for about six months. They still are not confident in their ability to speak English, but this unit acts as a turning point. Although not yet fluent, the students realize that they not only can share prepared information, but also express opinions and argue points. This makes their confidence and enthusiasm soar. They may even ask to have another meeting!

## *Module three*

The first unit of the next module is company results. The students must make a profit and loss (P&L) statement and explain it to their constituents, referring back to their graphs on sales trends from the previous year. To give a grammar push, we usually ask students to show their P&L statements from the past two years in order to get them to use comparatives. This provides a thread of grammatical cohesion between units.

In the next unit, the students are told that, despite the economic crisis, their companies have had excellent financial results. This usually corresponds to their P&L statements, which typically show a profit. Because of this, they are to expand their company to another city, province, country, or continent. For this unit they must imagine that they are members of a market research firm contracted by their companies to investigate three different sites for future expansion. The students must write a memo comparing the relative advantages and disadvantages of the different locations such as the labor costs, tax rates, potential market, etc. They are told that, since they are simply independent researchers, they cannot actually decide where to expand, but they can make recommendations. Later, when they are back in their roles as company presidents, the students decide on the new location.

The next unit continues the theme of future plans. Students must make firm plans for their company-such as where will they expand (which reviews future verb forms), and tentative plans, (which introduce modals of possibility). They must describe orally and in writing their plans for staffing, budgeting, marketing, etc.

By this time, the companies *are* a reality and the students are presidents or owners. And now it's time to complete the Annual Report. The Annual Report is nothing more than a compilation of all previous work; that is, all relevant information for anyone wanting to know about the company. The only thing lacking is the first element of any Annual Report: a letter from the president.

In this unit, we discuss the kind of information that goes into such a letter, as well as its organization, format, and register. Register is an especially interesting topic as the letter can be anything from informal and intimate (Hello Friends!, Dear Fellow Pizza Lovers) to very formal (Esteemed Colleagues). The students must choose which register they find appropriate for their company, as well as what information they want to include in the letter. The letter is where the students report their decisions on expansion based on the earlier memo.

With the submission of the Annual Report, the written portion of the course is finished, and the only task remaining is a formal oral presentation. The scenario is the same for the first presentation in which the audience is comprised of potential investors. The students now have a

lot more information and language capabilities, and the presentations and questions from the audience consolidate the goals of the course.

## Practical Considerations

There are several questions which must be addressed in a simulation course. The first is: Does the teacher teach content or language? This has been dealt with in the literature (see Troike 1993-1994, and Pinto 1993), and the general consensus is that one can't help but teach both. In a class where the English students are also students of business, they are not familiar with business terminology and concepts, even in their native language. This makes it necessary for the teacher to be knowledgeable about the business register. However, as in all areas of ESP, teachers must remind themselves that they teach English, and that although knowledge of business is necessary, the focus in the class must remain on the language.

On occasion, a teacher may be tempted to intervene on issues pertaining to context accuracy. For example, one student had a worldwide chain of hotels that was just two years old but had over 25,000 employees in Spain alone. Another student had a computer manufacturing company which custom-built computers according to private clients' specifications. Being so specialized, one would imagine that this company would be rather small; but on the contrary, it had more than 20,000 employees. These figures are quite unrealistic and if I were a business teacher, I'd ask them to correct the numbers. However, since I am an English teacher I accept their figures. After the students have had more real-world experience, they will correct their false assumptions themselves.

A second question relates to the Annual Report. What we call an Annual Report-a compilation of all written student work throughout the year-isn't completely authentic. For example, it contains the internal document describing a process within the students' companies, as well as a memo from the outside consulting firm regarding alternatives for expansion. These would not appear in a real Annual Report, but in this class we are not dealing with reality. We are dealing with English in a context that resembles reality. And the benefit for student motivation that comes with calling this compilation an Annual Report far outweighs the fact that the document that the students produce is not an authentic Annual Report.

## Conclusion

This paper has explained the Entrepreneurial English simulation class, but the possibilities for business English simulation are endless. The benefits are clear. First of all, the lack of authentic materials for the EFL classroom becomes irrelevant. Secondly, students with no real experience can study various aspects of business English within a coherent framework; their role as entrepreneurs gives them a context and "identity" that helps them to overcome their lack of experience or knowledge. Finally, the idea of having their "own" company leads students to take

an unusual pride and interest in learning and applying business English in the most profitable way possible.

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